"If they share their puppets - you know they will share their knowledge" - a study of teacher leadership in Early Childhood,

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Introduction

As a result of Education Department organisation and political change early childhood education in Western Australia has undergone many changes in recent years. Over the last twenty years community based preschool centres run by early childhood specialists have slowly been incorporated under the umbrella of local primary schools. In some instances this has meant more stable, experienced management, inclusion in a positive school environment and the availability of many educational initiatives. Under the jurisdiction of school principals the early childhood field has had the advantage of annual planning cycles, regular performance management, professional development and departmental policies designed to ensure consistency and quality in the production of a valuable educational service. In the process of this change there have also been some noticeable losses.

With the best intentions some primary school principals, who became responsible for making decisions about program administration, resource allocation and data collection in pre-primary centres, had very little, if any, experience, knowledge or understanding of early childhood practices and philosophy. Combine this with system level curriculum and management decisions, made by personnel with little or no knowledge of the early childhood phase of learning and teaching, pedagogical support for teachers in this sector began to disappear. This has included a loss of early childhood Curriculum Officers in a majority of district offices which has led to the dismantling of regular teacher support networks and a general lack opportunities for communication between teachers working with young children.

The final erosion of the recognition of early childhood education as a specific sector of education has been the removal of the Department of Education director of the early childhood directorate in June 2002. It is the intention that the responsibility for early childhood education is now shared across all curriculum directorates within the Education Department with no guarantees given that staff in these directorates will have any direct early childhood training or experience. This restructuring has prompted one state MLC, Barbara Scott, to warn, "when early childhood expertise at a senior level is removed, programs will suffer. It is imperative to have an early childhood voice at a senior level to ensure that WA can boast world-class early childhood programs" (Hewitt, 2002). The question of leadership within early childhood education in Western Australia is critical at this point in time.

Consolidation and confirmation of excellence in practice is needed to maintain quality programs in early childhood centres. Early childhood teachers need to reflect on the issues surrounding the conservation and development of early childhood practice and philosophy for the future. It is time for early childhood teachers to carefully examine a definition of leadership within the field. What is needed is a commitment to develop the personnel and resources to make it possible for early childhood professionals to become teacher leaders, share their knowledge and empower others to develop leadership roles within school communities.

This essay will explore some recent literature on general and early childhood educational leadership in an attempt to map current debates and changes in thinking. I will describe an investigation which was conducted as an initial exploration of experiences and issues facing
beginning teachers with leadership potential, one an early childhood teacher who has been identified by the education system as a leader in the field and an one experienced early childhood University lecturer. From the data collected in semi-structured interviews with the five participants a variety of themes around the identification of teacher leadership skills, comparisons of experiences and issues have emerged.

**Leadership Literature**

As leadership is a significant area of interest in many professions, in some fields, such as business and management it has dominated research and generated a market in popular press which offers advice, training and solutions on how to make leadership in organisations more effective. Trends in the literature since the eighties and nineties shows a change in focus in leadership research. It is changing from one that concentrated solely on the effectiveness and characteristics of one person to focussing on the process of leadership and the effectiveness of teams of leaders working in specific social and situational contexts. (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2001, Gurr 1996, Kilpatrick, Falk, Johns and Smith 2002)

The traditional leadership paradigm, which invested influence and power in the key attributes of a single position or person, is often described as transformational form of leadership (Gurr, 1996). This view focussed on the leader's ability to organise, create visions, initiate change, provide direction, supervise work and, according to Burns (1978) "provide purposes and visions that are socially useful, meet the needs of the followers and elevate followers to a higher moral level" (cited in Sergiovanni, 1996, p.94)

Kilpatrick et al (2002) explain this perspective of leadership as being confused with a management role and suggest that "management creates stability and leadership creates change" (p.3). They go on to clarify that management can be defined as a specific set of skills and behaviours whereas leadership is seen to be dealing more with uncertainty and change in organisations.

When considering the historical view of leadership study Bray (1999) points out that the 'old' understanding of leadership related more to an industrial mode of thinking that assumed that leadership resided in those with certain 'preferred traits', influenced followers to do what they wished in order to achieve the organisation's goals. They were responsible for "establishing and focussing on a vision, enticing people into that vision and then ensuring that vision is lived out" (Bray, 1999, p.12). In contrast to these earlier understandings, Bray defines leadership as residing in the relationships of groups of people rather than in a single person in command. He draws on the work of Rost (1991) who considered leadership a dynamic relationship, which resides in a group of people- leaders and collaborators working together to effect real change. Inherent in this definition are some basic assumptions which include the notion that the leadership relationship is one of influence involving both leaders and collaborators influencing each other and that all intend real changes which reflect the purposes of both groups. From this premise Bray concludes that because leadership is invested in a relationship, not an individual, all members of a group can, and will 'do leadership' in episodes of varying duration. Gronn (2000) shares this view and agrees that within an organisation, all members can probably be shown to lead for at least some of the time.

Gronn (2000) also reflects there have been many differing points of view on the value and effectiveness of single leaders who are attributed a position of power and considers that, in fact, leaders in this position are more dependent on followers than the reverse and research into leadership needs to focus on followers, their minds and social networks not the leaders
themselves. From a similar point of view, Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001) viewed leadership from a distributed perspective framework. That is, in believing that it was not enough just to know what leaders do, they developed a framework for examining not only what, but how and why leaders are effective including identifying the tasks completed, actions taken, influence of other people and interactions within an organisation. The framework was developed from “distributed and cognition theory that underscore how social context is an integral component, not just a container, for intelligent activity” (Spillane et al 2001, p.23). It is from these two readings that a sense of leadership as a complex relationship is beginning to emerge. The implications of this combined with the history and organisational change makes a study of leadership in the early childhood sector very important. It is critical that leadership in this sector is redefined by those working in the field to align with current thinking.

Early Childhood Leadership

For the last twenty years early childhood professionals have been reluctant to identify leadership as a part of their professional role despite often being in a position in schools and centres where they very consistently act as competent advisors and decision makers (Rodd 1998) and this trend is also deliberated upon by other researchers in the field (Kagan and Bowman, 1997, Waniganayake, Morda and Kapsalakis, 2000, Fleer,2000,). One explanation for this phenomenon could lie in the nature of the field of early childhood itself. Could it be the people who work within the field help contribute to the lack of leadership within it? A reluctance to strive for a role which is perceived to be one of authority and power could be one reason early childhood workers are not often found in leadership roles, especially in educational settings. Rodd (1998) adds that this problem could be exacerbated by the fact that a majority of workers in the early childhood field are female, and suggests that some may have a reluctance to accept leadership roles with wider connotations of power and responsibility than normally experienced as a classroom teacher.

As a possible solution Morgan (1997) recommends that early childhood professionals need to become comfortable in roles in which leadership, influence and authority are a part and accept that in order to advance the concept of leadership early childhood professionals need to accept the power associated with leadership roles and learn to use it in the unique context of the field.

One of the major issues emerging is the importance of establishing a definition of the concept of leadership in early childhood by early childhood professionals themselves. Waniganayake et al (2000) debate it could be how leadership is defined by those working in early childhood centres that may be part of the problem. They suggest that leadership training, combined with “documenting, reviewing and reflecting on one's own beliefs and experiences within a given sociocultural context by individuals in early childhood settings can contribute to the process of advancing our understanding of leadership” (p.20). As a result of this action they conclude it may be possible to “reconceptualise, articulate and implement leadership in early childhood in a meaningful way “(p.21).

It is important for the field to formulate a broad definition of leadership that will include all spectrums of the field from advocate, to researcher to those working directly with young children. Added to this is the complication that each early childhood setting has unique features and characteristics which will affect the leadership required within it (Rodd, 1998). However, Kagan and Bowman (1997) stress that it needs to be clear within the field whether leadership “functions and characteristics are determined by the institution or position or
rather the qualities and capabilities of individuals" (p.6). It could be that a definition emerges that encompasses both these aspects.

Finally questions about the preparedness of the early childhood profession to advance to the twenty first century have been raised from within the field (Fraser 2000). Fraser predicts that in the "new early childhood professional needs to become a teacher of excellence, capable of advocating for and providing conceptual leadership to the field as well as promoting the value and importance of the early childhood years" (p1).

Leadership Research in the Early Childhood Field

In the process of identifying and critiquing research related to the issues of early childhood leadership it was extremely difficult to find specific articles which related to early childhood teachers working in school contexts. One reason for this could be that very little or no research has been done in this area. It could be possible that, due to the absence of a clear definition of leadership within the field, it has been difficult to research this topic. It could be, as alluded to earlier, that due to the gender imbalance within this field and reluctance of women to assume leadership roles there may not have been a call for leadership research to be conducted.

Rodd (1998) notes that the majority of leadership studies conducted on women in leadership positions have occurred in the primary and secondary sectors where the followers consisted of a mixed group of women and men. This type of research investigated to what extent female leaders shaped their behaviours on the traditional male model of leadership (Rodd, 1998). The results from these studies cannot easily be transferred to early childhood settings where the majority of followers are women and situational contexts can be vastly different to other settings.

Teachers as Leaders.

While a number of studies were available about the various aspects of leadership, these mostly focussed on the school principal as the leader of the school. Some leadership studies have been conducted in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions and these investigated the interactive relationships between a variety of contextual factors such as teachers effectiveness within school reform, shared leadership in teams and the effect of specifically designed leadership training.

Crowther (1997) describes a study of fifteen effective teachers and paraprofessionals that met four leadership criteria developed by the School Leadership Institute (University of Southern Queensland). This study has reported some interesting aspects of teacher leadership within the Australian context. It is particularly interesting in that it highlights the concept of teachers as leaders. Crowther states that not enough credit and consideration has been given to the notion of teachers as leaders. Leadership theories based on concepts of leaders and followers have tended to "cast teachers in positions of relative dependency and powerlessness" (Crowther, 1997, p6), he suggests this should change.

examined factors that supported school reform and found that in the last decade leadership in some schools is being reconceptualised. The type of leadership found in their research is defined as 'parallel leadership'. That is teacher-leaders and administration-leaders sharing a common sense of purpose, a high level of mutual trust and valuing individual expression and
contribution. "It is most naturally located in schools, where the creation of meaning from teaching and learning constitutes the core business" (Crowther et al 1997, p.14).

have offered the following definition of teacher leadership: "Teacher leadership is behaviour that facilitates principled pedagogical action toward whole school success. It derives from the distinctive power of teaching to shape meaning for children, youth and adults. It contributes to enhanced quality of community life in the long term" (Andrews, Crowther, Hann and Mc Master, 2001, p. 25). This definition looks to describe how teacher leaders exercise influence in their school communities. From this definition the authors have developed a "Teachers as Leader Framework" and suggest that although it might idealise the image of teacher leaders it does reflect the essence of the work that is done within schools where teachers are designated as leaders both within the schools, community and profession.

My Research - The study

The work of Andrews et al (2000) and Rodd (1998) and others has had an impact on my own thinking about the nature of leadership in early childhood. At first my thinking reflected the earlier ideas of leadership - one or two strong, clear leaders that rose above the crowd and were looked up to by the 'followers'. In studying the literature and thinking about some of the research it is obvious that while this still happens and individuals will stand out, it is also possible for anyone in the field to assume the role of leadership at any particular time and demonstrate qualities of leadership.

The work of Crowther, Mc Master, Hann and Diamond (2001) and their development of the Teachers as Leaders framework demonstrated for me that it is through a scaffold like this that teachers may be able to redefine their definition of leadership and recognise their own potential to assume leadership qualities.

While it was difficult to locate many studies in early childhood leadership in a way this is encouraging. It indicates a gap in the knowledge base and is particularly critical in Western Australia where it appears that recognising early childhood as a sector with a unique philosophy and specific ways of teaching and recognising learning is being undermined.

Through the planning phase of the research project I conducted this semester and with my mindset still thinking of leadership characteristics I became interested in the notion of leadership potential in undergraduate student teachers. My research questions were framed to investigate particular characteristics neophyte teachers' display that might be considered to be indicators of leadership potential by experienced teachers and teacher educators. I investigated the perceptions three beginning early childhood teachers' held of the impact of critical incidents during their first year of teaching on their notion of themselves as competent teacher/leaders. Finally I explored phenomenon which interviewees identified as possible valuable support in the development of potential teacher leaders.

The three teachers that I interviewed were all part of a group I travelled to Italy with in 2001 to experience the early childhood education system of Reggio Emilia. This world renowned system is recognised as outstanding early childhood practice and considering the commitment these young teachers had to the study tour, during a time of international turmoil and uncertainty, I felt that this was an indication of leadership potential. In addition two of these teachers later received awards at their graduation ceremony for outstanding academic and community achievements.
In an attempt to triangulate the leadership characteristic data I also interviewed a University lecturer with vast experience in training teachers for the early childhood sector and an early childhood teacher with many years of experience who had attained a level 3 teaching status with the Department of Education.

Data Collection

To collect the data I arranged to interview the five participants, each interview was taped and the information from this data was recorded on a matrix. The interviews were semi-structured in nature as I planned some questions for the participants and prior to visiting them for the interview I sent them the questions to reflect on and make notes if they wished. I found that this gave a much richer source of information as each had made notes and had thought of things they wanted to talk about. Through each of the interviews I allowed each participant to talk of things that were related to the topics but not necessarily contained in the questions and in this way the interview remained unstructured. Various themes and subthemes have emerged from the information gained in the interviews.

Conclusion

Information from the unstructured interviews conducted in this study resulted in the following responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Early Childhood University Lecturer</th>
<th>Early Childhood Level 3 Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Indicators of leadership potential of beginning teachers as identified by experienced teachers and teacher educators. | • Commitment/passion for ECE  
• Self confidence  
• Thirst for knowledge  
• Ability to motivate others/ Charisma  
• Reflective about their own practice  
• Uses theory to inform practice | • Dedication  
• Willingness to work with others  
• Attitude of constantly learning  
• A variety of teaching experiences  
• Constantly question own practice  
• Guides and mentors during professional experience  
• Critically evaluate and try new ideas and ways of doing things |
| Support in the professional development of potential teacher leaders. | • Establish networks before beginning teachers leave the University  
• Maintain some level of contact after graduation | • Close proximity and constant contact with a mentor  
• Feedback given positively  
• Encouragement from significant others |
Table 1: Responses from Experienced early childhood professionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant critical incidents</th>
<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 2</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Assistance of university peers</td>
<td>• Assistance of University peers</td>
<td>• Assistance of University peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Isolation</td>
<td>• Isolation</td>
<td>• Collaborative workplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of induction</td>
<td>• Lack of induction</td>
<td>• Strong pedagogical models: peers, colleague</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strong pedagogical models: employers, colleagues</td>
<td>• Strong pedagogical models: Reggio Emilia</td>
<td>• Strong pedagogical models: Reggio Emilia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive feedback and advice from a co-worker</td>
<td>• Positive feedback in workplace</td>
<td>• Positive feedback in workplace</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lack of interest from school administration</td>
<td>• Lack of interest from school administration</td>
<td>• Positive feedback in workplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A feeling of incompetence</td>
<td>• A feeling of incompetence</td>
<td>• A feeling of incompetence</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Responses from Beginning early childhood professionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal support needed in the early years of teaching</th>
<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 2</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Experienced colleague/mentor in workplace</td>
<td>• Peer/friends to contact</td>
<td>• Peer/friends to contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Peer/friends to contact</td>
<td>• Contact with University staff</td>
<td>• Contact with University staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Contact with University staff</td>
<td>• Critical friend in the workplace</td>
<td>• Critical friend in the workplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strong induction to school’s procedures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff who are generous with their professional knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants in this short study openly discussed their thoughts on what the qualities and support needed to ensure that beginning teachers with leadership potential are nurtured...
within the early childhood profession. The experienced level 3 teacher spoke of her personal experience over a number of years while the teacher educator was able to identify the qualities she considered strengths in beginning teachers.

All participants recognised the impact of early positive experiences in school where a colleague or mentor takes the time to show interest in what the beginning teacher is doing and is able to offer help and advice as needed or requested. It is important that schools who receive beginning teachers can be aware of the challenges the school community may face due to inexperience, lack of confidence and feelings of inadequacy and put into place processes which will assist beginning teachers in a positive way.

Universities training teachers also have a responsibility to support new teachers by providing a program that will develop qualities of resilience and confidence and encourage students to develop networks of supportive peers and colleagues.

 Longer term case studies would be needed to determine whether influences talked about in this study continue to have the impact on beginning teachers with leadership potential. However, I think it is important that the dialogue about establishing and maintaining teacher leaders begins and continues. That debate and discussion is needed about the definition of leadership within the field of early childhood.

It is important that early childhood teachers begin to talk about and develop a commitment to making available personnel and resources to make it possible them to become teacher leaders, share their knowledge and empower others to develop leadership roles within school communities.

References


